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European Union

Biotechnology

European public skeptical about GM agri-food

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Report Highlights:

Public opinion in Europe continues to be skeptical towards GM crops and particularly GM food, seeing them as having little value and dangerous for society. In addition, GMO field trial applications are down by three quarters since 1998 and R&D projects into GMOs are being cancelled.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Brussels USEU [BE2], E2

Across the EU as a whole, there is little support for applications of biotechnology to GM foods, according to a new pan-European survey commissioned by the European Commission. GM crops only have rather modest support. This is in contrast to other applications of biotechnology such as genetic testing which are widely approved.

For agri-food applications of biotechnology, most Europeans do not support them, seeing them as having little value and being dangerous for society.

The countries currently in favour of maintaining the moratorium on GM crop approvals – France, Greece, Italy, Denmark, Austria and Luxembourg – all have public opinion in balance opposed to GM crops. Belgium is the only moratorium supporting country not in this list. In addition, the Swedes are also in balance opposed to GM crops. Spain is the only country showing strong support for GM crops.

Opposition to GM foods is much more pronounced, with 11 out of 15 European countries' public opinion being on balance opposed to it. For the survey, GM Food is defined as making foods higher in protein, lasting longer or tasting better, etc. GM crops are defined as the taking of genes from plant species and transferring them to crops to increase, for example, resistance to pests.

In the past three years there has been little change in attitudes to GM food, which initially turned negative (declining support and increasing negative views) during the period 1996-9.

When asked whether they would buy GM foods, opinion was mixed. People were asked whether they would consume GM foods if they contained less pesticide residues, were more environmentally friendly, tasted better, contained less fat, were cheaper, or were offered in a restaurant.

The most persuasive reason for buying GM foods is the health benefit of lower pesticide residues, closely followed by an environmental benefit. Of the range of benefits included in the question set, price was seen as the least incentive for buying GM foods.

The report however cautions that what people say and what they do are sometimes rather different. It could be that people were answering as citizens rather than as consumers.

In the different EU countries between 30% and 65% percent reject all the reasons for buying GM foods. Countries least in favor are Greece, Ireland and France, with the UK, Austria and Finland having the highest acceptability ratings.

The report also comes up with an interesting conclusion regarding potential behavior of consumers as they start to accept one or the other reasons asked above for buying GM food.

“Once a threshold of minimal acceptability is reached, then people are inclined to find a number of the reasons acceptable for buying GM foods. These results could be taken as indicating a more or less total rejection of GM foods and discussed in terms of the impossibility of introducing such new products. On the other hand, it could be argued that if GM foods actually offered some of these benefits, and if they were labeled appropriately to give the rejecters the opportunity to express their preference, then the products might capture a sizable market share.”

The European Commissioner for Research, Philippe Busquin, highlighted that lack of public support for biotechnology is a factor behind a serious slowing down of biotech R&D in Europe.

In another EU study, the number of GMO field trial applications has dropped by 76% since 1998. In addition, 39% of survey respondents (see link below) had cancelled R&D projects on GMOs in the last four years. For the private sector alone, this figure rises to 61%.

European Commission, "Review of GMOs under R&D and in the pipeline in Europe"

<http://www.jrc.es/gmoreview.pdf>

Eurobarometer "Europeans and biotechnology in 2002"

http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index.htm

Related report from USEU Brussels:

Report Number	Title	Date released
E23029	EU Commission presents Co-existence Paper	3/10/2003

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